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The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE RING OF TRUTH

IN HIS novel, "The Way of All Flesh," Samuel Butler introduces a student of divinity who maintains that it is necessary for a minister to give himself a thorough course in dissipation. Otherwise, according to the student's contention, a pastor would not be fitted to advise his flock of the pitfalls of the world.

This argument, like most sophistries, contains a grain of truth—and truth that applies especially to the would-be writer of fiction.

Perhaps the first requirement in fiction is that it shall be convincing. If the author undertakes to describe a man of courage, he must do it in such a way that the man shall seem real. The sentiments of a young woman in love must be so portrayed that they strike answering chords in the hearts of those who know. The introduction of a degenerate, a sot, a murderer, or a grave-robber carries with it the responsibility of presenting the characters as they are, or would be, in real life. And the author, in the very nature of things, cannot fulfil his responsibility without knowing, from first-hand experience, the workings of his characters' minds.

Does this mean that the author must experience the emotions of a murderer before he can write of them convincingly? Practically, yes. Literally—well, let us consider.

Surely Shakespeare, with his vast range of characters, from those of high ideals to those of deepest infamy, did not live in actuality through every mental, moral and emotional phase that he depicted. Balzac was not required to die a slow death from tuberculosis in order to produce "The Magic Skin." The graphic portrayal of the emotions that attended Bill Sikes after his murder of Nancy does not imply that Dickens had ever in reality committed such a crime.

Carry the experience requirement too far, and we can imagine a new form of editorial rejection slip, reading somewhat as follows: "Your story contains such a vivid portrayal of the emotions of a criminal that we are compelled to turn the manuscript over to the

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district-attorney of your locality as evidence, *ipso facto*, of your own guilt. Trusting that we may see more of your work, Sincerely, etc."

And yet—we are balked on the other hand by the logical assertion that it is impossible to write convincingly of emotions we have not experienced. What is the solution?

It is twofold. Our stories must have the substantial foundation of experience, but—the experience may be elaborated, multiplied, and manipulated by imagination.

Just as the scientist, given a few bones from the skeleton of some antediluvian animal, is able to reconstruct the creature entire and to clothe it in flesh, so the imaginative writer, given a suggestion of the sensation he wishes to portray, may elaborate it into a vivid and realistic account.

He does not need to be a housebreaker in order to know the housebreaker's sensations. At some period in his life—perhaps when, as a child, he was tempted by an unguarded cooky-jar—he yielded to an overmastering impulse and took a forbidden something by stealth. His imagination seizes upon this incident, substitutes a vault full of jewels for the cooky-jar, the lure of wealth for the cravings of appetite, and readers are gripped by his realism.

Or, suppose he wishes to portray the career of a murderer. He has, in all probability, known what it is to be angry—so angry, perhaps, that he doubled his fists and struck, or wanted to strike, a vindictive blow. The incident is probably one of many; it may date back to his childhood; but it has given him an insight into the heart of a murderer. Intensified, it would have resulted in a tragedy; for the impulse to strike is surely identical, save in magnitude, with the impulse to kill.

And then, either in connection with this impulse or at other times, the same writer has felt remorse—remorse over a harsh word spoken, over a duty neglected, over an injury inflicted. It is the same emotion, only less intense, that he would feel if he had taken a life. Combining these recollections and magnifying them as may be necessary, he does not merely surmise how a murderer feels—he knows. If his powers of expression are equal to the task, he can portray these sensations so that others will be moved by them.

And so with whatever emotion or type of character the author wishes to portray. The mental effort which nerves you to cross a busy thoroughfare—imagine it magnified a thousand times, and you know the sensations of a soldier going "over the top." Imagine that your desire for admiration from the opposite sex is very much intensified, and you have the heart of a flirt or "masher" revealed. Imagine that your unsatisfied longing for steak at a dollar a pound

or for cantaloupe at thirty-five cents a "cant," is for a ten-cent plate of beans, and you know the sensations of being "broke."

So it is, after all, unnecessary to emulate Butler's divinity student, by indulging in vice or dissipation, in order to write convincingly of vicious characters. Unnecessary, that is, *if* we have the requisite imaginative power. Every imagination has its limits. Having been very hungry upon occasions, I can imagine how it feels to die of starvation; but it is difficult for me to realize the sensations of—say, a chicken hatching from an egg. The carefully nurtured young woman who attempts to write a story portraying the evils of drunkenness is doomed to failure, no matter how good her intentions. Her narrative will be convincing only to others who, like herself, have never been intoxicated.

Observation of others may, it is true, greatly assist in extending the scope of our personal experiences. For example, take the young woman who has never been intoxicated. She has observed others while they were in that condition, and her reasoning may be: "A drunken man acts somewhat like a person who is ill. I have been ill; therefore I know how it feels to be under the influence of liquor."

She will be partly right and partly wrong, and without some experience to guide her selection, she will not know which part is right and which wrong. Reasoning from observation, without the basis of at least *some* actual experience, is a process full of pitfalls. The remedy is for the author either to provide himself with experience or, in such cases as that under consideration, to seek a subject on which he or she is qualified to speak from "inside knowledge."

Incidentally, this discussion raises a number of fascinating questions, such, for example, as whether women are qualified to write convincingly from the male point of view, and vice versa. If it is true that, never having been a drunkard, one stands little chance of writing convincingly of such an unfortunate's sensations, it would seem that, never having been a woman, a man stood but little chance of making his feminine characters convincing. And yet—but perhaps readers will have some elucidating comments to make upon this phase of the question.

One fact, at any rate, stands out as indisputable. The more vivid our imagination—in other words, our power of transmuting a minor sensation into a great one, or of combining fragmentary emotions into a composite feeling—the better are we equipped for fiction. Experience helps, it is true; but the writer of "stay-at-home" proclivities need never find himself handicapped for material, if his imagination is of good caliber. As the occasion arises he will transmute his own commonplace defense of his chicken coop into the darling of St. George; his "calf-love" sentiments into a "grand pas-

sion"; his occasional wish to "set things right" into the zeal of a reformer; his pleasure at handling money into the greed of a miser; his moment of discouragement into the despair of a suicide.

It may be that a vivid imagination is in part the development of experience. That, however, is another matter.

One great thing that the student can do when his characters seem to be mere puppets, when the words they speak and the acts they perform seem forced and lifeless, is to ask himself: "Am I merely putting words into their mouths—forcing them to go through appropriate movements—or am I *living* through them—injecting my own life and thought into my creations?"

For in this sense, at least, the creator of a piece of fiction should *live* through the actual experiences of those he is portraying. He must not merely *see* his characters in action—he must *be* each and every one of them, either in turn or simultaneously. This means not only the admirable characters but the evil characters as well. When the time comes to present a scene in which a depraved criminal appears, the author must not merely put the words into his mouth, he must identify himself with that criminal, see things through his eyes—be actuated by his desires and distorted views of life.

The difference between a character handled from the "outside" and one handled from the "inside," as it were, is the difference between a counterfeit and a real dollar. They may look alike, but only one will "ring true." While we may guess what a character will say in given circumstances by looking at him, we may *know* only by assuming his personality.

Even when a number of characters are being handled within a single scene, the true creative artist instinctively feels this identity with his characters. His mental faculties are divided, as it were, into parts. While one segment of his mind is filled with the chivalrous sentiments of the hero, another must be filled with envy toward him; still another may be plotting to poison the mind of the heroine, while the segment representing her is offering a silent prayer.

The power to effect such division of the mental faculties necessarily implies a type of mind peculiar to the creative writer. To experience the emotions of even one imaginary character is more difficult than many realize; and the difficulties are multiplied when every character that appears in a story must be similarly dealt with.

There is the consolation, however, that if it is done at all it must be done instinctively. The more we think about it, the more impossible the task appears, like that of the centipede that was happy until some one asked which leg came after which; whereupon it "lay distracted in the ditch, considering how to run."

Every one, it is safe to say, carries in his breast experience-material sufficient to serve as the basis for almost every emotion

chronicled by Shakespeare. But it is only in the mind of an imaginative giant that the pangs of jealousy which in some form and degree all of us have experienced are transmuted into such studies as "Othello," or that the universal passion is glorified into a romance of the "Romeo and Juliet" caliber.

The fiction writer should *live*, generously, freely, broadly; but two-thirds of his living may safely be done in the actual process of creative narration. If he does not possess sufficient imagination to transmute the ordinary experiences gathered in his daily life into the more intense development of his fictional creations, it is safe to say that he lacks the essential gift of a fiction writer. *W. E. H.*

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FROM time to time in The Student-Writer will appear criticisms of fiction and photoplay plots, or even other forms of literature, including short-stories that are brief enough for publication. Nothing over 1,000 words in length can be considered; a good plot can often be presented in fifty or 100 words. The names of subscribers submitting material for this purpose ordinarily will not be published. The plots or stories selected for criticism will be those a discussion of which is likely to be generally instructive.

* * * *

IN PART of the June, 1919, edition of The Student-Writer occurred a typographical mixup on pages 7 and 8 which was not discovered until several had gone out through the mails. If subscribers who received these imperfect copies will notify us, we shall be glad to forward correct copies to take their place.

* * * *

THE summer season usually witnesses a falling off in literary production. The student, however, who works while others take it easy is the one who forges ahead. One thing that every writer can do to advantage is to furbish up his old manuscripts, submit the "homers" for constructive criticism, and otherwise prepare for an active onslaught upon the editors when the summer vacation season ends. Market conditions are reported exceptionally good by writers who are regularly submitting manuscripts.

* * * *

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The critic does not enjoy answering questions of this character, not that the answers are difficult, but it is a foregone conclusion that the student who would ask them is too lacking in observation or enterprise to make any use of the information. They are representative of a type of question that the student could answer himself by a little investigation of current books and magazines.

Don't be content with second-hand information on subjects that you can easily dig out for yourself.

—W. E. H.

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